DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 660 CG 011 245

AUTHOR Cole, David L.
TITLE Teaching the Cultural Biases of Social Psychology.
PUB DATE 6 Sep 76
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (84th, Washington, D.C., September 3-7, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Comparative Analysis; Critical Reading; *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; *Ethnocentrism; Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; *Role Theory; Social Attitudes; *Social Psychology; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS China

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the author has used children's stories, published in the People's Republic of China, to explore the ethnocentrism in American academic social psychology. The stories are read to students in the author's undergraduate classes in social psychology, who then discuss the themes of the stories. Comparisons are made with stories commonly available to children in this country. Major emphases in the stories from China include: (1) an emphasis upon helpfulness and cooperation in the pursuit of group goals; (2) a minimizing of roles defined by sex, age, or social prestige; (3) the early introduction of children into adult roles; (4) error seen as ignorance, calling for reeducation rather than punishment; (5) care of personal and group belongings. The frequency of these themes is contrasted with their appearance in American children's literature. Attention is then directed to the cultural differences which have been noted, as these relate to emphases within areas of interest common to American social psychologists. To date attention has included the various psychological needs identified by Henry Murray, with particular attention to the achievement motive. Maslow's need hierarchy is reexamined in terms of the orientation of the Chinese stories, and a similar reexamination is made of Kohlberg's stages of moral development. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED137660

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
David L. Cole
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Abstract

Teaching the Cultural Biases of Social Psychology

David L. Cole

Occidental College

This paper describes how the author has used children's stories published in the People's Republic of China, to explore the ethnocentrism in American academic social psychology.

The stories are read to students in the author's undergraduate classes in social psychology, who then discuss the themes of the stories. Comparisons are made with stories commonly available to children in this country. Major emphases in the stories from China include: (1) an emphasis upon helpfulness and cooperation in the pursuit of group goals; (2) a minimizing of roles defined by sex, age, or social prestige; (3) the early introduction of children into adult roles; (4) error seen as ignorance, calling for reeducation rather than punishment; (5) care of personal and group belongings.

The frequency of these themes is contrasted with their appearance in American children's literature. Attention is then directed to the cultural differences which have been noted, as these relate to emphases within areas of interest common to American social psychologists. To date attention has included the various psychological needs identified by Henry Murray, with particular attention on the achievement motive. Maslow's need hierarchy is reexamined in terms of the orientation of the Chinese stories, and a similar reexamination is made of Kohlberg's stages of moral development.

CG 011 245

Teaching the Cultural Biases of Social Psychology (1)

David L. Cole

Occidental College

Over an eighteen year span of teaching social psychology, the author has become increasingly concerned with the degree to which what is often taught in that course reflects a culturally biased position, a bias which can easily go unnoticed by text author, instructor and students alike. Trends of the past decade which have seen an increasing Third World consciousness, as well as increased awareness among women students of the social status of their sex, have added to my concern that the biases which I believe are so often implicit in the subject matter of social psychology be brought to the student's attention.

During the past year, as a result of research by my wife and I, a medium has been found, which in two runs to date, have proven very useful in pursuing the goals just described. Over recent years, the Foreign Language Press, in Peking, has been exporting increasing numbers of children's stories from the People's Republic of China. Traditionally, Chinese children's literature has been strongly didactic, and the present stories are no exception. Products of a controlled press, they represent the "ideal society" to the child in a very concrete and forceful manner. We have completed a survey of the themes found in 44 of these stories. It is the characteristics of these themes which provide the main basis for discussing the ethnocentricity of some aspects of social psychology.

Using children's literature for getting at the values and central ideals of a culture is not a new idea of course, and so the topic can be approached through an existing research history, such as the work of McClelland and others, on achievement motivation. Having demonstrated the use of stories in past research, I then turn to a description of the dominant themes found in the current Chinese literature. Work is available to support the contention that the literature exported to this country is

(1) Paper presented at American Psychological Association, Washington D.C. Sept. 6, 1976.

indeed representative of that found inside the PRC, that the themes differ in content from those found in non-Communist Chinese areas such as Taiwan, and that the themes found in the literature from the PRC are strongly and explicitly Maoist in emphasis.

With this background, and reading several of the stories to illustrate my points, I note that the dominant themes in these stories are as follows:

(1) Helpfulness and cooperation in pursuit of group goals. Striving for individual success does not appear in the stories. Personal gain and personal comfort are spurned in seeking the common good. Inclusion within the group is taken for granted.

(2) Minimizing of roles defined by sex, age, or social prestige. Women are as likely to be the central figure as men. All virtues are shared equally by the sexes. There is no job or social role differenciation between the sexes. Age-related roles are not stressed. Parental roles are minimized. While there is much evidence of adult concern for children, it is a concern shared by the entire community, and not centered in the parents. Persons gain prestige by their acts contributing to goal of the group, not by occupation, education, or individual achievement.

(3) Early introduction of the child into adult roles. Duty comes before pleasure. Play has very little place. Children frequently do adult jobs and share the same goals as adults. Goal attainment brings lavish praise, but not material reward. The highest praise is for having proven oneself true to the ideals of the revolution and thus come to stand as an inspiration for others who will follow.

(4) Error seen as ignorance rather than either stupidity or any flaw of personality. When figures in the stories do err, it is in the form of failing to see the implications of their actions for the attainment of group goals. This failing calls for reeducation, not punishment. No one is ever ridiculed or threatened with exclusion.

(5) Care of personal and group possessions. Although acquisitiveness is never presented as an ideal, taking care of what one owns or what the group owns is a recurrent concern. Conspicuous consumption is conspicuously absent and psychological obsolescence unheard of.

Presentation of these themes inevitably brings from the students recollections of themes from their own favorite childhood stories. A frequently cited source is the Little Golden Books, and I have made a supply of these available to the students. Many students immediately find old friends among these stories. The stories are noteworthy in their contrast with the themes just described: (1) individual goal seeking and achievement are frequently stressed; (2) sex, age, and status roles are often quite marked; (3) childhood is often portrayed as a carefree period, free from adult responsibilities; (4) naughtiness is sometimes taken for granted and laziness and carelessness are frequently portrayed and punished; (5) little attention is given to care of material objects. Themes in the American stories which had passed by unnoticed stand out sharply when the stories are read in the context provided by exposure to the stories from China.

It is unusually easy for the students to see similarities between the themes of the American stories and their own value systems, and the contrast between these and the ideals held out in the Chinese stories. When that has been achieved, emphasis shifts to some of the theories and research emphases in American social psychology. To date, three avenues have been fruitful areas for discussion.

First, we have surveyed several of the most frequently researched needs in the list first compiled by Henry Murray. We look at the meaning ascribed to these individual needs, and consider how they are presented in the Chinese children's literature. Need achievement is a particularly useful example, in part because of the great amount of research which has been done on the concept, in part because it is very meaningful to the students, and in part because that body of research includes themes from stories and myths. It quickly becomes apparent that while there is something akin to achievement striving on the part of the heros of the Chinese stories, it must be significantly redefined. Gone is the emphasis on individual achievement. Instead, one extends oneself to achieve the goals established by the group. That which would extend or expand the role of personal gain

is non-existant. Reward comes only in the form of group approval.

Similar transformations are needed for practically every one of the needs on Murray's list. Some needs never find any direct expression as felt needs in the Chinese stories because their fulfillment is as automatic as breathing. Need affiliation and need dependence are two, and their automatic satisfaction provides a good take-off point for discussing concern over these in our own society and why they have subsequently become of interest to psychologists.

A second line of comparison has been to turn to Maslow's need hierarchy, and particularly, to consider what "self-actualization" might mean in today's Chinese society. Again, it becomes clear that one must be highly selective in picking only particular parts of Maslow's concept, and other aspects must be either minimized or ignored. One achieves fulfillment in the ideal world of the Chinese children's story only by serving the common good, and perhaps coming to symbolize self sacrifice to the group.

A third area explored to date is in connection with Kohlberg's theories of stages of moral development. Here, of course, the emphasis must shift, for the issue is not whether the Chinese are capable of given levels of moral abstraction, but rather whether their existing value system would see the "higher" stages described by Kohlberg as really desirable. It is clear that there is a strong moralistic strain running through the Chinese stories, indeed much more so than in the American stories, but it is very doubtful as to whether this moral emphasis allows a "higher" morality than that represented by the teachings of Chairman Mao.

The aim of my approach is to raise questions as to the extent to which values derived outside of science implicitly and explicitly direct the doing of science. With the issue approached through exposure to the Chinese children's stories, it is possible to pick up on many areas of social psychology where the issue may be raised. The authoritarian personality is a particularly obvious one, but small group research, the debates over leadership styles, and the emphasis in attitude change

studies among others, allow similar analysis.

When I began teaching social psychology many years ago, the message I tried to give to students was very clear: psychology is a science. The best scientific methodologies are experimental. The lab is the best place to do experiments. Truth will be found in that way, and transported to those needing truth. Most of that arrogance has faded. I still try to convey the concern for a sense of evidence. I still present psychology as a field constantly posing the question of how we decide that something is a "fact" about human social behavior. But I have tempered my approach. I now try to present social psychology as a product of its time, and of the people who engage in it. I discuss how the scars of antisemitism influenced Freud's interpretation of humankind, and how at a later date the same scars led to some assumptions in the studies of authoritarianism. I stress how a male dominated society created a male dominated science, which selected male oriented interest topics. And I suggest that the values and potentialities which theorists have placed at the apex of their concepts of human kind are themselves value judgments derived from a sphere wider than psychology. In this last effort, the analyses of the children's stories has been particularly useful.

We, of course, do not contend that the children's stories portray life as it is, but rather the ideal of which it ought to be, as seen from one perspective. Psychologists, by contrast, frequently seek to "tell it like it is," or at least, as they perceive it. But in discussing human potential, psychologists have not been loath to describe an ideal, indeed an ideal ostensibly uncovered by "science." But it is not the ideal portrayed in the Chinese children's literature. And the contrast is not hard for the students to see.

The issue is not whether social psychology is a science, but whether science is culture free. The issue is probably not, although this is less clear, whether the theorists and researchers cited recognized the cultural limits of their conclusions, but first whether these are regularly made clear to the students, and second, whether

a cultural alternative is clear enough to the students so that they can really see the relativity involved. Again, the Chinese stories have provided an effective portrayal of such an alternative.

A major question however, is whether the conclusions of social psychologists stem from empirical data or from culturally determined preconceptions which subtly direct problem selection, research strategies, and so, conclusions. This is the toughest one of all, and one I hope to leave the students pondering at the end of the course.